

Sapelo Reserve Celebrates 30th Anniversary

On December 22, 1976, then-Georgia Governor George Busbee, with representatives of the United States Department of Commerce, signed a document sealing a state-federal partnership for the creation of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Sanctuary.

Thirty years later, this unique collaboration has produced a program that has rightfully achieved its place in coastal Georgia as a leader in estuarine education and scientific data monitoring as well as the affirmation of Sapelo Island as a primary venue for ecological scientific investigation.

From its beginning in 1976 as America's second national estuarine sanctuary (South Slough, Oregon was the first), the Sapelo Sanctuary has evolved into its present status as the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve (SINERR), a designation it has had since 1987. The SINERR, the only Georgia reserve, is one of 27 similar programs along America's coastlines that are administered federally by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the largest single agency within the U.S. Department of Commerce.



“The mission of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS), and the Sapelo reserve specifically, is to provide scientists, educators and coastal resource managers working within the fields of policy, science, management and stewardship with up-to-date and reliable information pertinent to changes in our nation's estuaries,” said Buddy Sullivan, SINERR director.

“Here at the Sapelo Island NERR we are charged with the responsibility of providing a pristine environment for the gathering of accurate water quality data according to established criteria and protocols as laid down by NOAA. This, in turn, provides a useful platform to facilitate estuarine research by ecologists and biologists, as well as a variety of environmental educational opportunities for public populations,” Sullivan added.



Multi-Faceted Mission

The multi-faceted mission of the Sapelo reserve includes:

- ensuring a stable environment for research through long-term protection of island resources;
- addressing coastal management issues identified as significant through coordinated

estuarine research within the national reserve system;

- enhancing public awareness and understanding of estuarine areas and providing suitable opportunities for public education and interpretation;
- coordinating research and engaging in scientific monitoring programs within the reserve; and
- Disseminating the resulting data to be utilized toward the improved understanding and management of estuarine areas in coastal Georgia.

From its beginnings in the 1970s, the reserve has been managed by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, specifically the Game Management Section of the Wildlife Resources Division.

The reserve’s programs, including research, monitoring, education, and many of its administrative operations, have been funded by annual grant awards from NOAA. For many years the SINERR staff comprised only a manager and a tour guide.

Reserve Grows

“In the last several years, however, the reserve has grown tremendously, due to the outstanding support we receive from Georgia DNR and NOAA,” said Sullivan, who has been reserve director since 1993. “For instance, the permanent staff of the reserve is now up to 15 persons, including a “core” staff of director, research, education, stewardship and coastal training coordinators and visitor center manager. We also have a full-time monitoring technician, a part-time volunteer coordinator, a tour guide and various administrative support staff.

“In addition, the State of Georgia provides incredible support in annual funding for the operation

of our mainland Visitors Interpretive Center which the reserve operates as the primary public conduit for the visitation of Sapelo.”

Reserve staff in addition to Sullivan includes Dorset Hurley, research coordinator; Brooke Vallaster, education coordinator; Aimee Gaddis, stewardship coordinator; Suzanne VanParreren, Coastal Training Program coordinator; Bill Merriman, visitor center manager; Pat Carson and Stacy Rowe, visitor center clerks; Nancy Alford, office manager; Gloria Morris, receptionist; Yvonne Grovner, tour coordinator; Patrick Hagan, monitoring technician; Mary and Ron Burns, volunteer coordinators; Renee Valle-Hay, coastal training assistant; Ann Mason, communications specialist, and Lindsay Howell, assistant monitoring technician. The reserve also has two NOAA-funded Graduate Research Fellows, Sarah Hemmings and Justin Manley.

The National Agenda

Over the last several years, the SINERR has enjoyed increasing visibility in the national arena, largely through the auspices of its federal partner, NOAA, and its sister reserves in the national system.

In 1996, SINERR hosted the annual NERRS/NOAA workshop and conference at which about 150 representatives from 23 other reserves and NOAA gathered for weeklong sessions for strategic planning and to discuss issues of relevance to the system. In 2001, the Sapelo reserve hosted the national research coordinators and associated personnel for a four-day conference focusing on scientific and water quality monitoring issues. SINERR hosted the national stewardship coordinators workshop in 2005.

SINERR participates with the other national NERRS in its biological, hydrological, nutrient, and weather data collection programs, known as the



System-Wide Monitoring Program (SWMP). The reserve was among the first in the national system to complete a comprehensive site profile, *The Ecology of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve*, published in 1997. The reserve has also published an extensive educational curriculum guide geared to middle and high school students. In 2001, the SINERR funded and coordinated the production of two video programs, *The Sapelo Island Lighthouse*, and the reserve’s site-specific video, *Sapelo: An Island in Time*, and established its own internet website at www.sapelonerr.org.

The reserve’s volunteer organization, The Friends of Sapelo, was created in 1996, and more than 200 members are now on its rolls. The friends group provides a wide range of support activities for the reserve, including assistance with educational programs, maintenance and repairs on reserve

facilities, beach monitoring and bird and wildlife surveys.

Research and Monitoring

Paramount to understanding the processes involved in changing environmental conditions is the development of programs that provide precision monitoring coverage of the biological and physical processes within the estuary. The Sapelo reserve has developed a research and monitoring program that emphasizes a series of directives within the marshes and waterways surrounding Sapelo Island, including continuous water nutrient monitoring and analysis, assessment of estuarine health associated with oyster, crab and fish populations within the reserve; continuous weather data collection with satellite transmission for public real-time viewing; maritime forest restoration within altered habitats; and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) mapping of the SINERR's natural resources.

Dorset Hurley, SINERR research coordinator noted, "Many of our projects should be interpreted as ongoing as they fit into the primary mission of the national and state program objectives.

"The research and monitoring programs associated with the Sapelo reserve play an important role in achieving greater understanding of the dynamics within our nation's estuaries. This is accomplished by comprehensively quantifying and qualifying both short-term variability and long-term trends associated with the influencing factors of natural and anthropogenically-induced change," Hurley said.

The reserve's federal partner, NOAA, also provides funding to sponsor two Graduate Research

Fellows who conduct studies within the reserve representing a wide spectrum of environmental objectives.

The Sapelo Island NERR has established important partnerships with a wide range of agencies for the improved implementation of cooperative scientific and educational programs. Some of these partnerships include the Georgia Coastal Zone Management Program (also administered by NOAA), University of Georgia School of Marine Programs, including the Marine Institute on Sapelo, University of Georgia Marine Extension Program, the Turner Foundation, the Sapelo Foundation, Georgia Southern University, The Nature Conservancy, the Georgia Conservancy, Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary, Altamaha Riverkeeper and the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography.



Education and Outreach

SINERR is committed to providing a high standard of education and outreach. The reserve staff currently conducts year-round ecological and cultural day trips for about 6,000 people a year. Another 18-20,000 people pass through the Visitor Center each year for programs, SINERR tours or to obtain information about Sapelo Island and the surrounding coastal Georgia region.

Brooke Vallaster, SINERR Education Coordinator, has guided the outreach effort of the reserve since 1999. “Our outreach and education efforts have grown considerably in the last decade,” Vallaster said. “We have evolved from guided tours and short day-trips in the ‘80s and ‘90s to the development and implementation of curriculum-based programs, including workshops and training for schools, teachers, coastal decision-makers and the general public. A particular emphasis is placed on professional teacher development with approximately 150 teachers participating in SINERR sponsored workshops each year. Plus, our visitors center has provided the SINERR with a mainland ‘hub’ from which thousands of visitors gather information and resources about Sapelo and the Georgia coast each year.”

One of the key components of the SINERR’s outreach program is the diverse suite of training workshops conducted by the reserve for coastal decision-makers, including local civic officials, scientists, developers and educators for symposia geared toward specific issues and concerns of direct relevance to promoting effective and responsible coastal resource management in Georgia. This national NOAA-funded initiative is called the Coastal Training Program. It entails an advanced, ambitious extension of the former Decision Maker Workshop program of the 1990s. These new educational initiatives have placed the Sapelo reserve in the forefront of the various entities providing cutting-edge outreach opportunities focused on providing increased understanding of the coastal environment.

